PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVIANCE AMONG CHILD MOLESTERS

Question:
Does psychological deviance predict the recidivism of child molesters?
Background: Child molesters often display deviant attitudes and problems in social functioning. For example, it is not uncommon for child molesters to chronically feel lonely and rejected, to prefer friendships with children than with adults, and to believe that children are not harmed by sexual contact with adults. There has been little research, however, examining whether such characteristics are associated with the risk of sexual recidivism.
Method:
Psychological deviance and static risk factors were assessed in 53 child molesters referred to community treatment programs in the United Kingdom. The static risk factors were assessed using Static-99, a validated risk tool that combines offence history, victim characteristics and demographic information into an overall risk rating. Psychological deviance was assessed using fourteen self-report questionnaires measuring emotional loneliness, personal distress, emotional identification with children, sexual obsessions, and deviant attitudes. The child molesters were classified as "Low Deviance" or "High Deviance" based on a statistical clustering program that examined their overall pattern of responses.
Recidivism information was collected from the national data base maintained by New Scotland Yard.
Answer:
After six years, 15% (8 out of 53 men) were reconvicted for a new sexual offence. Recidivism was predicted by both Static-99 scores and by psychological deviance. Even though Static-99 and Deviancy were correlated with each other, both factors contributed independently to the prediction of sexual recidivism. Static-99 scores, however, were related to recidivism only for the psychologically deviant group. The recidivism rate of the Low Deviancy group was consistently low (4%; 1/30), regardless of their Static-99 scores. The overall recidivism rate for the High Deviancy group was 30% (7/23), with the highest rate found among the High Deviancy offenders with high Static-99 scores (46%; 6/13).

Policy Implications:

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1. Risk assessments with child molesters should consider the offenders' attitudes and social functioning along with their criminal histories. Offenders with low psychological deviance may have substantially lower recidivism rates than the rates predicted by actuarial risk instruments.
2. Treatment programs are most likely to be effective if they target empirically based risk factors that are potentially changeable, such as attitudes tolerant of adult-child sex, emotional identification with children, and sexual preoccupations.
3. Further research is needed to identify the best methods of evaluating the criminogenic needs of child molesters, and for determining the extent to which changes on these measures are associated with reductions in recidivism risk.

Source:
Beech, A., Friendship, C., Erikson, M., & Hanson, R. K. (2002). The relationship between static and dynamic risk factors and reconvictions in a sample of U.K. child abusers. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 14, 155-167.

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